

Raising the Bar

Sunday 27 September 2009 – Rev Lance Thomas
Matthew 5:17-20

When I was minister at St Aidans in Putaruru the church purchased the property next door. Quite a large property on which we added to and reconstituted old buildings into a community centre. To cover the cost of all this development we built a village of five homes which we on-sold the right to occupy. When we had finished it all we subdivided the land into three areas. The church, the community centre and the village. At this point we got a visit from the council chief engineer. The water supply for the village which we had only recently put in, with council approval, was in the wrong place. It went through the community centre land. It would now have to be relayed up the recently tarsealed joint driveway. We were not delighted about the unnecessary cost. And the ripping up of our new seal, to achieve the same thing as we already had. We pointed out that we owned all three pieces of land and the community centre was not going to cut off the village's water. I walked around the properties with the engineer as he explained the regulations to me. At the end of our walk around I said, 'what do we do now?' Armed with his book of regulations he said, 'you will do what I say'. I said, 'I'm sorry but this is just crazy and we won't be doing what you say'. After he had gone I wrote a letter to the Mayor pointing out that the council generously gave grants to the community centre but significantly more than the grants would be spent in adhering to an interpretation of a regulation in a way it was not intended. I never got a reply from the Mayor. Just a couple of months later a Code of Compliance came through in the mail.

Our reading from the scriptures today comes of course from the Sermon on the Mount. And it is about regulations and interpretation. Jesus is telling his hearers that not for one moment are they to imagine that he came to abolish the law and the prophets. We would call that the whole of the Old Testament. The inference in the statement is that some are suggesting that that is what he is about. It was only the start of his ministry, yet he had already generated controversy over plucking corn on the Sabbath and healing a man's hand on the Sabbath. And he spoke with an amazing authority. People said, 'what is this new teaching. With authority he commands even the unclean spirits and they obey him.' (*Mark 1:27*) So apparently the question was being asked, what's the relationship between Jesus authority and the authority of the law of Moses?

It was clear to the people that the Scribes and the Pharisees were submissive to the law of Moses, for they were teachers of the law. They devoted themselves to its interpretation and claimed for themselves no authority apart from the authorities they quoted. I see the Scribes and the Pharisees as being like the moral and religious building inspectors. This is the regulations and we interpret how they must be understood. But Jesus was different. He quite often used a formula that no prophet had ever used. He would introduce some of his most important statements with the words, 'Truly I say to you ...' speaking in his own name and his own authority.

So they had questions. And Jesus says, 'think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets – I have come to fulfil them'.

The Old Testament contains different kinds of teaching but Jesus came to fulfil them all. Firstly there is the doctrinal teaching. The revealed instructions of God. At its heart it is instruction about God and Man and Salvation. Jesus fulfils this revelation, completes the revelation in himself, in his teaching and his work. The God with skin on stuff. One writer says the Old Testament is the Gospel in a bud, the Testament is the Gospel in full flower. Secondly the Old Testament contains predictive prophecy. Much of it looks forward to the coming of the Messiah, how this would happen. Jesus fulfils all the prophecies. In Matthew's Gospel he often uses the phrase, 'all this took place to fulfil what was spoken by the prophets'. The climax of this, of course, was his death on the Cross and the way that brought a completion of the elaborate and priestly and sacrificial systems of the Old Testament. In a sense they were just a shadow of what was to come, the substance was Jesus.

Thirdly the Old Testament contains the moral law. The boundaries of life. They were often misunderstood and even more often disobeyed. Jesus fulfilled them by firstly obeying them but he does more than obey them himself, he explains what obedience will involve for his disciples. He rejects the superficial interpretation of the law given by the scribes, instead he reveals the full depth of meaning that was intended. He fulfils it by declaring the radical demands of the righteousness of God. This is what he stresses in the rest of Matthew 5 by giving examples. And we will touch on that shortly.

But before that we need to understand what else he is saying. 'Until heaven and earth disappear not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen will by any means disappear from the law until everything is accomplished.'

The Kingdom of God, the reign of God in peoples' lives came in Jesus, but it is yet to come in all its fullness. Until that day, until the day when every knee shall bow, every tongue confess, that Jesus is Lord, until that day, the law stands. In its entirety. And what's more, one's place in the kingdom is determined by obedience to the law and witness to others. 'Anyone who breaks one of the least of the commandments and teaches others to do the same, will be the least in the Kingdom.'

My first reaction to that is to say that's okay, I'll be happy to make the cut. I don't think I want to be among the hierarchy of the greatest. But that's a misunderstanding, we are in the kingdom now. If we have accepted Jesus as Lord, we are already under the reign, the Lordship of God. It's not a hierarchy of status, it's a measurement of effectiveness. Put that way I am not happy to be among the least. I want to be among the best, in effectiveness for the kingdom.

If you follow professional golf at all you will know that a professional golf tournament goes for four rounds. After two rounds half the field are cut, sent home, don't come back tomorrow.

Those who turn up to play the third round, don't do so with an attitude, I've made the cut, so I'll just take it easy. No, they give it heaps, do the best they can hoping to finish as high as they can.

You are in the Kingdom, you have made the cut, but it is not time to sit back on that achievement, it is time to do the best, be the best, show the best you are capable of.

Obedience to the law determines what is best. You may grasp that truth to smash head long into the next one. Unless your righteousness your commitment to God's way surpasses that of the Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. You will not make the cut. Surely not. The Pharisees were obsessed by the law. They had determined that there were 248 commandments and 365 prohibitions in the law. And their goal was to meet them all. Jesus wasn't saying, if the best Pharisees managed an average score of 230 then Christians must manage to keep an average of 240 of the commandments. The focus of the Pharisees and Scribes was the commands themselves. The goal was to meet the commands. Jesus is calling for an understanding of the intention, the spirit, the person, the relationship behind the command.

When I drive on the road and the sign says 100km per hour, I can drive in any conditions, ice, rain, darkness, at 100k and feel I'm within the law or at 95k and feel virtuous. The difficult signs are the limited speed zones signs. Where the law says you must drive safely and I have to decide what that is. It's not stipulated for me.

The Pharisees were content with an external and formal obedience, a rigid conformity to the letter of the law. Jesus teaches us that God's demands are far more radical than that. The righteousness that is pleasing to him is an inward righteousness of mind and motive. For the Lord looks on the heart.

It was a new heart righteousness which the prophets saw as one of the blessings of the coming of the Messiah. 'I will put my law within them and I will write it upon their hearts, God promises through Jeremiah 31:33. How would he do it? He told Ezekiel, 'I will put my Spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes.' (36:27) God's two promises to put the law within you and to put his Spirit within us coincide. The righteousness is a depth righteousness, the law on your heart, obeyed in the power of the Spirit within.

In the natural we don't have God's ways on our heart and we lack the ability to live as if we do. No matter how hard we try.

That's why the Gospel tells us we must be born again, born of the Spirit. The new righteousness is evidence of new birth and no-one enters the kingdom without being born again.

Repeat slides

Lord God I want my ways to be your way. I confess I know the difference and I do not live your way.

Fill me now with your Holy Spirit put your law in my heart that I may truly live as you intend me to.